

DOUBLE OR BUST

We take three price-doubled road bikes around a world-class test stage to see how much it's smart to spend

Word: Guy Kesteven Photography: Russ Ellis

Most of us would like to spend as much as we could get away with on a bike, but that's almost certainly not a smart use of money. So, at what point are you still getting worthwhile gains for each chunk of cash you spend?

After years of cheaper bikes getting better every season, have the recent economic and political events reset previous expectation benchmarks?

To find out we selected three bikes that seemed to represent reasonable value at £1000, £2000 and £4000 and hit the roads to see whether the extra investment was rewarded.

Not just any road either, we took our three →





contenders to Yorkshire to tackle the beautiful back roads and brutal climbs that form the heart of both Stage 2 and the women's race of the 2017 Tour de Yorkshire. With the finish town of Harrogate tipped to host the 2019 World Championships it's likely these same roads will decide the rainbow jersey winners in two years time. It also has several belting pie shops, cafes and even a couple of breweries along the way should we need to refresh or review our testing.

Poundland

A smoothly surfaced, traffic-free bike path follows an old railway line northwards from almost the centre of town, and to get acquainted with our rides we're soon spinning around the edge of town then out over a deep wooded gorge on a viewpoint viaduct.

There's no missing Lapierre's Audacio with its vibrant yellow paint and distinctive humped top-tube alloy frame. The 20-speed Shimano Tiagra shifting is par for the course at £1000, with only a few exceptional economy models managing to provide 22-speed 105 for a grand.

Forme's Flash 2 gets 22 gears, courtesy of Shimano's next level up (over 105) Ultegra. It's hanging on a full carbon fork and frame with a claimed 850g weight, and rolling on light American Classic wheels. As we skirt around Ripley Castle, a short rise highlights the ease with which it climbs.

Interestingly, while it costs double the amount at £4000, Felt's new AR2 is only 200g lighter than the Forme. That's because when we shift gears to crest that same rise the mechs move with the whirr of Ultegra Di2 electric motors. That's not where the electrics end as a Pioneer power sensor on the offside crank whispers our wattage to the GPS on our bar, while rarely seen Sprint shifters [small additional shift trigger buttons, about 5mm in diameter, fitted underneath the bar tape on the drops of the bar to allow you to change gear while sprinting] give slick maximum speed ratio changes even when we're deep in the drops Mark Cavendish-style. It's the grippy Mavic tyres on the colour-coded kingfisher blue-hubbed Mavic wheels that we're glad of now as we weave downhill through fallen leaves.



LAPIERRE AUDACIO 300 CP

£1000 ★★★★★

SPECIFICATION

WEIGHT 9.62kg
(54cm)

FRAME Supreme 4
alloy

FORK Carbon
blades, alloy steerer

Gears Shimano

4700 Tiagra,
50-34/11-32,
20-speed

BRAKES Shimano
4700 Tiagra

WHEELS

Shimano R501

FINISHING KIT

Lapierre alloy stem,
Lapierre CR12 42cm

bar, Lapierre

SP-3D1 27.2mm
seatpost, Selle Italia

X1 saddle, 25mm
Continental Ultra
Sport 2 tyres

HIGHS

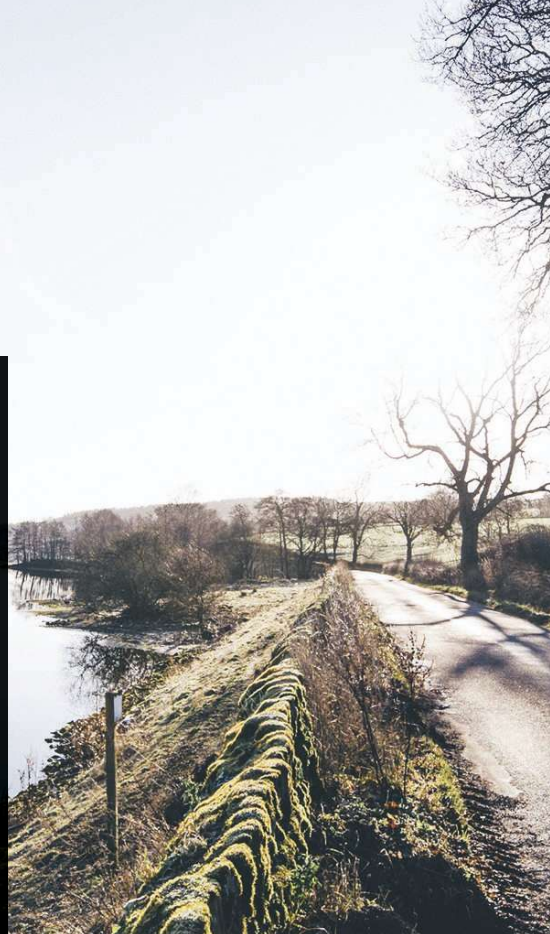
Smooth rolling,
hard driving
sportive bike with
reasonable kit

LOWS

High weight,
occasionally
harsh ride feel on
rough roads

BUY IF

You want a firm
pedalling, wide
gear range, upright
stance speedster





The Lapierre Audacio leads the way, for now



It's likely these same roads will decide the rainbow jersey winners in two years time



The next climb is steep enough to test power transfer for a few seconds and the results are interesting. While the metal frame weight helps gravity keep a firmer hold on the Audacio, the feather-light frame and Victory 30 wheels of the Forme flex and sap power surge as we try to force a gear over the crux of the ride. Settling back into the saddle as things level out showcases its spectacularly smooth glide, but we stop before the next climb to nudge the saddle forwards and shorten effective stretch of the very-large-for-its-size 54cm frame. There's nothing to tweak on the Felt as we crest the rise and the front mech moves across and then immediately self corrects to quieten the chain it's lifted onto the big ring.

Having deliberately dodged traffic on back roads we're back onto the race route as it hangs in lazy loops off the north side of Nidderdale all the way up to Pateley Bridge and its bunting-bedecked main street. It's pork and pastry, not patriotic flags, that see us unclipping and clattering into Kendall's award-winning butchers though, topping up protein with a Scotch egg and pocketing a pork and chutney pie for later.

Rock bottom

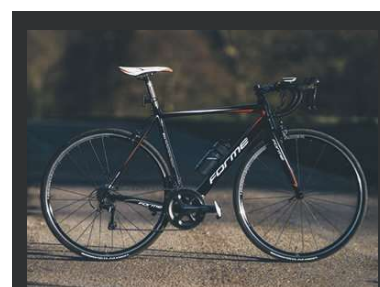
While we're dodging the infamous Greenhow →





It's the slightly stiffer frame and stickier Mavic tyres of the Felt that come into their own as each crank turn becomes an ice axe swing into the treacherously slippery mix of cold, wet tarmac and sheep muck. There are none of the baying crowds or chalked names that will undoubtedly greet the male and female TdY riders up the Cote de Lofthouse in April, and we're soon strung out in our own little worlds before the gradient eases off slightly then kicks up again over the cattle grid summit.

In the grand scheme of things you're looking at an extra £3000 only gaining around 100m at most. Plus if you spent your money differently then you could significantly reduce the disparity with a lighter cheap bike and/or a heavier boutique bike. With bridleways stretching north →



FORME FLASH 2
£2000 ★★★★★

SPECIFICATION

WEIGHT 7.49kg (54cm)
FRAME Torayca T800 carbon
FORK Carbon
GEARS Shimano 6800 Ultegra
BRAKES Shimano 6800 Ultegra
WHEELS American Classic Victory
FINISHING KIT Forza Cirrus stem, bar and saddle, 25mm Michelin Pro 4 tyres

HIGHS

Super-light and super-smooth all-rounder

LOWS

Noticeable frame flex under power, stretched ride position

BUY IF

You want a featherweight floater that thrives on guile not grunt

and Silver Hill climbs to the west and east respectively, it's still a gentle rise that sits on top of the gear all the way up the floor of the dale. We pass an eclectic mix of ancient farms, old water mills, top-class gastropubs, and cross the racing River Nidd over humpbacked bridges, before a little kick up just before Lofthouse confirms it's been enough to blunt the edges of our legs. Unsurprisingly, it's more obvious on the Lapierre, proving that over 2kg less weight goes a long way to keeping you comfortable on climbs. At least we're not desperately fighting for our position like the pro peloton will be as we turn right uphill and squeeze between stone houses that have been huddled together for warmth for hundreds of years.

Cadence soon becomes a weaving, out of the saddle grunt as speed drops, but wattage readings from the Pioneer power meter on the Felt spike savagely. With torque transfer at a premium the Audacio isn't doing so bad and while the wider range 10-speed block might mean the gears are further apart, its 34/32-tooth lowest ratio is more forgiving than the 36/28 of the Forme and Felt. The spine-saving ride of the Forme lacks backbone when it comes to muscling that gear round. A complete bike weight under 8kg – let alone 500g under – is impressive at £2000, but especially so as the similarly specced Ultegra Felt FR3 is £2499.



Pastry was the fuel of choice for our day of testing



Sitting in the middle of our budget, the Forme is an impressively lightweight ride



Quiet, picturesque roads will decide
Tour de Yorkshire results, but for now
it's all about what your money can buy



and south across the moors from here it's a reminder that the more specialist varieties of bike are now within reach of far more budgets. We can think of really good, uncompromised examples of disc, gravel, cyclo-cross, touring or even time trial bikes for well under £1000.

Beer money

As we face a predominantly descending route towards the brewery town of Masham that mass matters considerably less. Yes, there are still some short, steep grunts where the inertia of the Lapierre stalls early, but with gravity at our back it's an impressively swift feeling bike, not least because of the trademark silk-smooth bearings of the Shimano wheels. That alloy frame stiffness makes itself clear in a more staccato ride over the rougher parts of the beautiful back road down across Leighton Reservoir though. The Tiagra brakes are also noticeably less powerful than the Ultegra SLR-EV and TRP callipers of the other two bikes.

The little Sprint shifter stubs on the side of the levers give the Felt a welcome extra level of integration when we're hunkered down in the drops for a more confident handling feel or just to squeeze maximum speed from each downslope. The wheels and frame of the Forme make it an absolute featherbed on the sections

of field wash or frost ravaged roads that regularly roughen our route.

As we drop out of the wilds we gradually reintegrate into the civilisation of the hamlets of Healey and Fearby, with the long central greens of their untouched medieval layouts. They also mark the point where the rural roller coaster becomes a steadier descent towards the teashops of Masham ahead and keep us on the official Stage 2 route.

Suitably refreshed, the next leg of the journey follows the Tour de Yorkshire 2017 and Tour de France 2014 stages along slightly undulating roads to Ripon. Without big slopes for gravity to get a grip on, all three bikes tap along happily. The final drag up from Ripon and around the world heritage site of Fountains Abbey give enough of a twisty descent to finalise opinions. As we regroup on the quiet back roads into Harrogate we compare notes from our current day out and previous test rides.



Checkout

Even by £1000 bike standards the weight of the Lapierre has left it lacking on the climbs. The tall front end means we need to drop our elbows more to keep the wind at bay, and the wider ratio block with fewer cogs means we're occasionally caught between gears. In terms

Without big slopes for gravity to get a grip on, all three bikes tap along happily





The lighter Felt and Forme didn't leave our testers suffering as much on the hills

of function, it's the lack of braking power that we've noticed much more than the 10-speed transmission. That said, if you could stretch the budget by £200 the Shimano 105 stop and go of the Audacio 500 is worth the extra money in the long term.

Spending £4000 on the Felt is worth it too. The FR2 combines a really well sorted, lightweight, power-efficient frame with a shock-absorbing seatpost and carbon bar for an excellent all-round ride. Felt has raised its Di2 game by including the Pioneer power meter and rarely seen Sprint shifters too. That extends the worth-paying-more-for ceiling higher than normal for techies who will really appreciate the extra training information and gear control if you want to go as fast as possible.

As much as we're enjoying the faultless electric shifting and in-flight infotainment there's scant baseline performance difference between the Felt and the super-light, super-smooth Forme that's half its price. That makes the Flash 2 the smart money option if you get the right frame size to compensate for its long chassis. The fact that there's no way to discern its distinctively luxurious, low weight ride or stretched out feel on paper proves that whatever your budget it's always wise to try out your potential purchases in the flesh. **PLUS**



FELT FR2

£4000 ★★★★★

SPECIFICATION

WEIGHT 7.3kg (54cm)

FRAME UHC Advanced +

TeXtreme carbon

FORK UHC

Advanced +

TeXtreme carbon

GEARS Shimano

Ultegra Di2 52-36,

11-28, Pioneer

power meter and

Sprint shifters

BRAKES Shimano

Ultegra SLR EV (F),

Tektro T851 (R)

WHEELS Mavic

Ksyrium Elite

FINISHING KIT

3T Ergosum Team

Stealth carbon bar,

Prologo Nago Evo

PAS TiRox saddle,

25mm Mavic

Yksion Pro tyres

HIGHS

Lively all-rounder

with power meter

and extra shifters

LOWS

You're paying extra

for refinement

rather than obvious

performance

BUYIF

You're a tech head

after a light, data-

rich all-rounder



Taking a break from the loops around Nidderdale to stock up on supplies

